Message is loud and clear on streets of Glasgow. Will our leaders listen?

The Toronto Star

November 2, 2021 Tuesday

Copyright 2021 Toronto Star Newspapers Ltd. All Rights Reserved

Section: NEWS; Pg. A1-A3

Length: 880 words

Byline: Heather Scoffield Toronto Star Opinion Twitter: @hscoffield

Body

The Star's Heather Scoffield is travelling with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to the G20 Summit in Rome and the United Nations' Climate Change Conference in Glasgow, covering Canada's role in the shifting world order and the global fight against climate change.

Glasgow is in chaos.

Thousands of environmental activists, company executives, journalists, aides, politicians, Big Oil, clean energy, you name it - they're clogging the streets to crowd into the COP26 climate conference, braving cold winds and COVID-19 in an effort to say their piece.

COP26 is a two-day leaders' summit followed by 10 days of meetings of well over 100 countries to fight climate change, but the schedule was already thrown off on the morning of the first day as the pandemonium crept from the streets and the lineups onto the plenary floor.

One delegate was spotted in line clutching a bright red, papier-mâché elephant. CNN is broadcasting live from Edinburgh, 80 kilometres away. A garbage strike ripped through the neighbourhoods of Glasgow.

But this has the potential to be productive chaos. Even activists say the leaders seem to be listening, and in some cases, acting.

The eclectic energy of the crowd is on the minds of every country leader here, if their opening speeches were an indication. The politicians are mindful that the crowd has already delivered a clear message: action on climate change can't wait, and leaders will be held accountable if they don't produce a solid plan.

So it's no coincidence that on the first full day, Justin Trudeau used the podium to roll out some details for his election promise to put a cap on oil and gas emissions, and to tighten that cap over time.

That promise, if kept, is substantive, with serious repercussions for the oilpatch and for Canada's emissions profile. But until now, it was a bare-bones election promise with no framework or paperwork to back it up.

Trudeau took a concrete step on Monday, asking the new net-zero advisory body to figure out the best way to impose increasingly stringent caps on emissions from oil and gas.

While most of the country's big oilsands producers have publicly promised to reach net-zero emissions by 2050, the cap would impose timelines. Essentially, companies would either have to find more environmentally friendly ways of producing oil and gas fairly quickly - or be forced, perhaps, to cut production or buy carbon credits.

But governments, including Canada's, have a habit of talking loud but falling short when it comes to fighting climate change. And that's where the crowds on the street and the network of environmental and energy organizations present in Glasgow can have an impact.

Countries will be judged harshly for what they commit to this week, especially if they tout vague aspirations without any thought to implementation, says Canadian climate activist Catherine Abreu, founder of Destination Zero.

Trudeau will be spreading the word that Canada is a climate leader that other countries should emulate, she says, but the world also needs to hear that Canada's record on cutting emissions has been dismal.

When Trudeau tells the COP26 leaders that Canada is unique among oil-exporting countries in imposing a cap on emissions, Abreu asks whether there's a plan and does it start now.

"It's basically a very sophisticated form of peer pressure," she said from her perch in a corner of the summit site. "That works."

It can work for Trudeau, too.

A few days ago, the prime minister was in the Netherlands visiting Prime Minister Mark Rutte, and the two of them stopped by Leiden University in The Hague to speak to students. Trudeau told the students that not only was their environmental activism admirable, it was also useful for him. The louder they are, he suggested, the more scope his government has to take on fossil fuel producers.

"I need that, I need that to be able to push back against the industries that are trying to do less, even in Canada."

In Glasgow, Kenyan climate activist Elizabeth Wathuti was invited right into the room with the leaders, addressing them in opening ceremonies with a vivid description of what climate change has done to her continent, warning that it will displace 86 million people if not corrected quickly.

In an interview, 26-year-old Wathuti is passionate about why the cost of being present at the summit is worth it.

"I have felt the pain of not feeling heard."

The solution is to take every opportunity to be present, appeal to the leaders' humanity and worm your way into their hearts, she says.

"I think we can get to them."

But obviously, the dynamics of a sprawling summit that hears from so many different voices is hard to harness into a tight agreement that will deliver on the goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

Big business has its presence at Glasgow, too, making sure their voices don't get drowned out, and reminding leaders that cutting emissions doesn't come for free.

China, the world's largest emitter, is not expected to have any new measures at the summit either, beyond their commitments of last week.

And U.S. President Joe Biden showed up nearly empty-handed. His climate ambitions that had given people around the world so much hope are now snagged in a bitter Congress fight. Perhaps he could use some help.

Twitter: @hscoffield

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Message is loud and clear on streets of Glasgow. Will our leaders listen?

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Journal Code: TTA

Subject: CLIMATE CHANGE (90%); CONFERENCES & CONVENTIONS (90%); HEADS OF STATE & GOVERNMENT (90%); PRIME MINISTERS (90%); CLIMATE ACTION (89%); ELECTIONS & POLITICS (89%); EMISSIONS (89%); ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT (89%); ENVIRONMENT & NATURAL RESOURCES (89%); ENVIRONMENTALISM (89%); POLITICS (89%); UNITED NATIONS (78%); WRITERS (73%); EXECUTIVES (72%); CARBON OFFSETS (71%); COVID CORONAVIRUS (70%); ASSOCIATIONS & ORGANIZATIONS (69%); EMISSIONS CREDITS (62%); COVID-19 CORONAVIRUS (55%)

Industry: EMISSIONS (89%); ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT (89%); OIL & GAS INDUSTRY (89%); ENERGY & UTILITIES (78%); ALTERNATIVE & RENEWABLE ENERGY (76%); TELEVISION INDUSTRY (76%); WRITERS (73%); CARBON OFFSETS (71%); OIL EXTRACTION (71%); OIL SANDS (71%); EMISSIONS CREDITS (62%)

Person: JUSTIN TRUDEAU (92%)

Geographic: GLASGOW, SCOTLAND (73%); EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND (58%); CANADA (92%)

Load-Date: November 2, 2021

End of Document